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ABSTRACT

During the growth period of the 1960's and the early 1970's, community college institutional research focused on conducting surveys, compiling institutional reports on grades and enrollments, analyzing student characteristics, and providing background information for writing grants. The researchers came mostly from the teaching faculty and were relatively untrained in research methodology. However, current fiscal constraints, public dissatisfaction with the overall decline in student academic achievement, the increased enrollment of non-traditional students, and the growing importance of terminal, vocational education have required researchers to take on five management-related tasks: (1) studying institutional cost-effectiveness to meet increasing demands for accountability; (2) establishing marketing strategies for the recruitment of non-traditional students; (3) utilizing program needs assessment techniques to satisfy state reporting requirements and to determine program cost-effectiveness; (4) conducting periodic program evaluations; and (5) analyzing and providing solutions to problems in faculty contract negotiations. These functions will become increasingly important during the 1980's as community colleges face greater state control and more competition from four-year institutions. Thus, the institutional researcher will become closely allied with college management and is likely to need specialized business training. (JP)

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THE CHANGING NATURE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by Arthur N. Cherdack

In order to successfully contribute to maximizing the effectiveness of their institutions, research officers have needed to stay abreast of the changing climate of their community colleges. Clearly, in the past two decades the climate has changed dramatically, and concurrently, so has the focus of institutional research.

For example, in the 60's and into the early 70's community colleges were in a growth period with adequate funds to expand building programs and for the introduction of new educational programs (some very expensive) into the college curriculum. The legislative climate was generally favorable, as was the public attitude toward the support of higher education. Community colleges were enrolling large numbers of eighteen to twenty-one year olds whose major goal was to transfer to a four-year college or university. The vocational emphasis, although on the horizon, was not solidly embedded in the curriculum. Obtaining an education for the purpose of developing usable vocational skills or finding employment seemed secondary.

The number of institutional researchers, particularly those working full time during this period of time, was relatively small but growing. Moreover, these researchers came from diverse backgrounds, most commonly from teaching

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faculty, and were relatively untrained in research methodology and techniques. On-the-job training was the usual manner in which the work was learned. More importantly, a review of the literature reveals that researchers performed a wide variety of tasks as gleamed from the articles they published. Specific emphasis was placed on conducting and completing surveys and questionnaires, compiling institutional reports (grades, enrollment, etc.) analyzing student characteristics, providing supportive background information for writing grants, and consulting with instructors on various projects including some classroom experimentation. The research director was most often tied closely to faculty and desired that this loyalty and colleagiality which was built up over a period of time would be allowed to continue. Little direction was provided by management staff who themselves knew very little about the functions, except perhaps that "it sounds good", and "we can afford it". Many researchers, I dare say, selected their own projects.

Toward the middle to late 70's, however, the institutional climate began to change as did institutional research. Suddenly, there loomed a number of fiscal constraints facing community colleges brought on in part by the push toward increased accountability and the unwillingness of taxpayers to support higher education out of tax monies. In California a number of state finance bills were passed which provided less favorable funding for community colleges. Proposition 13, approved by the voters in 1978, took away a substantial portion of local

revenues and increased reliance on state support, The "Gann Initiative' approved by the voters in 1979, and the proposed "Jarvis II" Initiative are further evidence of the growing reluctance to support public services and agencies including higher education with taxpayer dollars as was done in former years. Public schools and colleges were being asked to justify their very existence. Low reading and math scores in K-12, and declining S.A.T. scores provided evidence that the schools were not doing their job and there was an overall decline in academic standards. Student demographics had changed with the influx of new "non-traditional" students, including senior citizens, minorities and women. In many colleges the average student age shifted from around nineteen in the early 60's to around thirty in the late 70's. The state became prominent not only in funding, but in reviewing and approving proposed educational programs, a role previously guarded by local boards of control. A further development in community colleges was the rapidity with which they began moving into collective bargaining, a trend that is likely to continue into the eighties. Finally, the career education movement began to take hold and the transfer function deemphasized, at least in terms of enrollments and student intentions.

For the institutional researcher, at least four major areas can be identified that directly relate to these latest trends. First, in line with the difficult fiscal times community colleges are experiencing, the focus has shifted toward

conserving funds without sacrificing quality. Institutional researchers are beginning to be involved in increasing the efficiency and productivity of their colleges without increasing expenditures. Knowing the budget is paramount in this effort. Having the tools and techniques such as some background in economics, finance, accounting and data processing can be ideal today. If it hasn't already happened, it may be that researchers will be increasingly sought who have these basic business skills.

Second, as indicated, student demography has changed since the sixties. We are seeing in California, and perhaps the nation, a trend toward students on the average are poorer, work more, increasingly come from minority backgrounds including women, are more part-time, and take lighter student loads. The researcher is beginning to become more involved in assisting in the recruitment and retention of these special target groups. Devising strategies for "marketing" the college is part of this effort. It is a fact that four-year colleges and universities are already draining off vocational students by establishing new career education programs. Since it is likely that, at least in the near future, community colleges will continue to be funded based on enrollments, attracting and retaining students will be a crucial function and the researcher central to this entire process.

Third, we are now in a period where it will be difficult to establish high cost vocational programs. Ironically, these are the very programs where program growth and expansion is justified based on job market trends and needs.

Statewide and regional coordination is being forced with establishment of special state and regional monitoring and planning groups. In California, once programs are approved at the local level, further review and approval is required by the State Community College Chancellor's office and the California Postsecondary Education Commission, an agency whose responsibility includes coordinating all segments of higher education. The state is now considering standardizing grading standards and reviews college academic and facilities master plans on a regular basis.

For the researcher this means that new skills will be required including utilizing program needs assessment techniques. Moreover, the researcher will need to know how to design experiments in the curriculum which lead to less expensive options to teaching. The use of television, correspondence courses, independent study, etc., and other non-traditional modes need to be analyzed on a cost-effective basis in terms of promise. Part of this process is related to maximizing the use of facilities both on and off campus to reduce program costs. The sharing of facilities and coordinating but not necessarily duplicating programs between adjacent or nearby colleges offers some ray of hope in this process. Recommending staffing patterns is also focal to this point since personnel costs are the largest part of the college budget. Researchers can and should be involved in all these processes as they work to maximize efficiency and reduce costs.

Fourth, and closely related to the above is the role

of the researcher in institutional "vitality" and accountability in the planning process. One key area in the program planning process aside from involvement in master planning is the program evaluation process. Data critical to program effectiveness, including placement, student followup, job market information, and cost information are more important now than ever before. Programs that were formerly carried in the curriculum without merit need to be phased out if no longer needed. All educational programs now need to be evaluated on a periodic basis. Sound advice must be provided to the chief instructional officer and the president in terms of program expansion, deletion, or maintenance. New programs based on need and other important factors should be recommended. The researcher may be in the best position to provide this support function. This point extends to institutional self-study as exemplified in the college accreditation process.

Finally, collective bargaining is an emerging area. Admittedly most contract negotiations are reserved for highly specialized management staff. However, specific parts of a contract, e.g. teacher and program evaluation and teaching load sections, might be improved upon based on the imput of a research specialist. The researcher cannot avoid the impact of collective bargaining which is forcing many in his/her profession into becoming management officers for the first time. As managers, those researchers coming up through faculty ranks find themselves in a new ballgame. They are

having to respon almost immediately to crisis situations thrust upon them by senior administrators. There seems to be little time to conduct scientific and pragmatic research. More time is required to legitimitize data and perhaps even compile information for support of management positions. This can result in a weaking of the colleagiality and the loyalty ties with the faculty discussed earlier. Further, under collective bargaining faculty will resist evaluation and are less likely to volunteer for committees and other activities as in the past. They will expect to be paid for these activities unless it is specified otherwise in the contract. It is not unreasonable for a researcher to be asked to monitor the contract, compile problems, and provide solutions in contract negotiations.

In the 1980's, I foresee the continuation of the trends beginning in the later 1970's; that is, we can expect continued and even increasing state control, competition from four-year colleges and universities, priority schools, and, yes, other community colleges for both students and dollars. Efforts toward conformity and standards and forced coordination in planning and evaluation will be intensified at least in California.. Whether to establish tuition could be the burning issue in that state. Our students may continue to change demographically in the direction I have indicated until we ultimately have "third world" community colleges. Increased financial aids should facilitate this process. Affirmative action policies will ultimately result in a more representative number of minorities on our staff. Fiscal constraints will

continue to haunt us as we continue to prioritize our limited resources. Capital construction, now practically at a halt due to the lack of funds should continue to dwindle. New and replacement equipment and the maintenance of our physical plants will deteriorate even further - this at the expense of keeping all our faculty and staff in their jobs. Look for little financial assistance from the federal government. Outside supplemental funding sources via grants will remain a viable means for augmenting college budgets.

Reporting responsibilities and workload will increase as pressures for accountability remain with us. Our academic master plans, capital construction plans, budget documents, etc., are only the beginning. District will need to rely on the computer even more as data collection procedures become more demanding. Management information systems, for a long time considered a non-translatable phase, will finally come a reality.

What do I foresee for researchers in the 1980's? Look for the institutional researcher in the 80's to work toward the development of a common duty statement that will more or less standardize their function. Second, look for researchers to become closely allied with the college management team and perform at least some functions in analyzing teacher contracts. Look toward researchers being hired who have more specialized training and background, including business, data processing, finance, accounting, statistics, research methodology, planning, evaluation and perhaps personnel. Look for a new emphasis in

research, based on marketing, recruitment and retention strategies plus continued analysis and dissemination of information on student enrollment trends. Finally, look for the research officer to carry on with certain identical responsibilities still with us from earlier years, e.g. survey research and responding to questionnaires; a trend likely to be intensified in the future due to the myriad number of reporting agencies.

Unfortunately, all these things may come while the research office budget remains small and the expectations from management big. Nevertheless, support will come from management for properly conducted research. There will always be the need for institutional self-assessment and the identification of problem areas requiring improvement. The researcher should recognize his/her shortfalls and strengthen and hone those skills and techniques where required. This will enable the college to draw upon a person with the qualifications to do whatever is required. Afterall, what more can one ask?

(Arthur N. Cherdack has served as Director of Educational Research and Analysis for the Los Angeles Community District and is currently Dean of Instruction at Los Angeles Southwest College.)

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